

Wine Library Associates  
of  
Sonoma County  
Oral History Series

Dante Bagnani

Interviewed by  
Jann Howie





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Wine Library Associates of Sonoma County Oral History Series



Dante Bagnani

Interviewed by Jann Howie

Fall 1984

Transcription 1992



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## Introduction

I interviewed Dan Bagnani in the Fall of 1984 as part of a Human Development Course entitled “Adulthood” at the University of California at Davis. The assignment was to do an oral history with someone of “later years”. Since I had known Dan since 1975 when I was a senior in high school I felt he would be a good subject for my assignment. I spoke with Dan in his office at Joe Ciattti and Company in Mill Valley, California. Dan was always one of my most favorite people, since he made everyone he came into contact with feel special. He had incredible patience and a warm, wacky sense of humor. If you were in trouble, you could always count on Dan to offer advice or assistance. Dan always gave of himself and took very little from other people—he gave a tremendous amount to the wine industry in Sonoma County when it was completely unknown and helped to put it on the map. And I think he also helped to create a vinegar “industry” and make people aware that there was more to making good vinegar than just “letting wine go sour.”

Jann Howie



Sonoma Country Wine Library Associates Oral History Series

**Dante Bagnani**

Interviewed by Jann Howie  
at his office at Joe Ciatti & Co. in Mill Valley, California  
Fall 1984

Transcription by Gail Ryan, 1993

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Jann Howie: When and where were you born?

Dan Bagnani: Born in San Francisco, 12-12-12.

Howie: That's almost like the eleventh hour of the eleventh month,  
eleventh day—

Born in San Francisco, raised in San Francisco?

Bagnani: Raised in San Francisco, yes, North Beach section.

Howie: And what about your family—what brothers and sisters?

Bagnani: There were five of us, three girls and two boys. We were all  
raised at the corner of Montgomery and Jackson, which was  
an Italian boarding house—not bawdy.

Howie: Boarding, yes. [laughs]

And where did you fall in the ages—youngest, oldest, middle?

Bagnani: Well, let's see now. Two sisters are older, I'm in the middle  
and then comes Agnello, a brother, and then a sister, exactly  
in the center.

Howie: Exactly in the center of the five.

Bagnani: And we were all one year apart. Which used to be the style,  
the Italian Style.

Howie: That's compact, gets them out of the way.

What is the background of your family—your mom and your  
dad?

Bagnani: They had come from Italy, Genoa. They had been in the wine  
business in Genoa. They had come here with the intent, like





all immigrants in those days, trying to make something out of it. My father, Guiseppe Bagnani, got into the Italian rooming and boarding house where there was a kitchen and thirty rooms that were rented. Everyday they fed all the men. Men who came there were immigrants who stayed only a week or two or three until they found jobs, mostly out of San Francisco—on farms and things like that.

Howie: Your parents came directly to San Francisco when they came from Italy?

Bagnani: Yes.

Howie: How long had they been in [this country]?

Bagnani: 1906.

Howie: And they started their family once they got here to San Francisco?

Bagnani: Yes.

Howie: Did they every get back into the wine business, once they got to California?

Bagnani: Yes, in conjunction with the restaurant business, a winery was started in the cellar, under the sidewalk of Montgomery Street. And wines were made there until 1918 when Prohibition came and stopped everything.

Howie: Did they make wines to sell?

Bagnani: No, just to use in the restaurant.

Howie: And Prohibition wouldn't let them continue doing that?

Bagnani: No, Prohibition would only allow wines to be made for sacramental purposes and medicinal. We did not make those kind of wines.

Howie: How did Prohibition affect your parents?

Bagnani: My father was so surprised he almost stopped selling wine.

Howie: [Laugh]

Bagnani: No, the restaurant business went on the same way, incidently, we did crush grapes and use grape juice in the restaurant. Several restaurants did that serving grape juice



instead of serving wine. And then we lasted until the Repeal of Prohibition in 1933 and we were in the same business. At that time, we also started a by-product business of wine making wine vinegar.

Howie: Your father started that also?

Bagnani: Started that also on Montgomery Street, several doors up from the restaurant. So we had the winery on one side of the street and the vinegar plant on the other side. And that was in 1933.

Howie: Was the whole family involved in that? As a young child did you work in the restaurant?

Bagnani: Yes, everybody worked. Waiters and waitresses, my sister, the oldest one, was at the cash register. That was a good job. Then in the vinegar business and the wine business we were all together in that. In fact, all my life it's been in a family business. Never did anybody work in something else.

Howie: Growing up—where did you go to school? In San Francisco?

Bagnani: I went to school, primary school it was George Washington Grammar, high school I went to Mission High School. And did not go beyond high school, as you can tell.

Howie: You can't tell that.

Do you remember anything special about childhood? Any events that stand out or are memorable?

Bagnani: That's hard to say. I remember the big family, of course. We had besides our particular family my father had three brothers and two sisters that all came from Italy in a space of about ten or twelve years and they were very close. And we had cousins and there were constantly Sunday kind of things, I call it miniature reunions, and certainly all the holidays. Growing up in a group like that, we are very close still with the cousins and, of course, with the two sisters remaining. One brother passed away and a sister passed away. I do remember that the kids we went to school with would like to come down and see us at the restaurant, cause they could eat, eat Italian food. Even in those days it was quite popular. It was quite different than it is today. We had a restaurant where everybody had to sit at the same table. The tables sat four people, and if two people sat at that table, a couple came in, we would not serve that table until two more came. Total strangers. We would call them over and say, "Sit here, there's





one space empty.” Because we would serve everything on a plate, a large plate of spaghetti, a tureen of soup and everybody helped themselves. Those were the portions instead of individually bringing a plate to a person. Even the meat was a platter of beef or chicken or something like that.

Howie: And they could eat as much as they wanted?

Bagnani: They could eat as much as they wanted, it was 35¢.

Howie: That’s amazing. Although that was probably the common price.

Bagnani: It was the regular price.

Howie: You grew up and stayed in San Francisco, did you move out—your family?

Bagnani: Yes, we moved out, in time we moved to the Bayview District, also called in those days Butcher Town. We sold the business and it was kind of a complicated thing, went into other businesses, but we always kept the vinegar business after we went out of the restaurant business. Five years after the Repeal of Prohibition we bought the vineyards and winery in Geyserville, called Geyser Peak Winery. So my father and mother moved up there and I stayed on Montgomery Street. At the vinegar plant there were rooms upstairs, we lived there, my sister and I. We ran the business there and my father ran the winery and vineyards. Incidentally, the place upstairs above the vinegar plant on Montgomery Street, was one of those houses. What do they call it—House of Ill Repute! And that took some doing to get rid of them. Because we wanted to live upstairs, we were in the hotel, as I say, a block away. And we knew we were going to sell the business and wanted to live above the vinegar plant. To get those women out of there was very, very difficult. My father devised a method of—oh, we reported them to the police and they laughed. We reported them to City Hall and they laughed. They were pretty well entrenched, that business in those days. We started burning sulfur, yellow powdered sulfur in cans every night when we left the winery. We would light three or four, they were like smudge pots, like you burn in the orchard. And the girls upstairs would cough. Finally they turned *us* in. They reported us to the police and the Department of Public Health, and they came down and told us we had to stop. “Do you know what kind of business they’re running?” “It doesn’t make any difference, you can’t do that anymore.” We finally worked it out. We bought all their furniture, 18 beds, dressers with the marble on top. Too



bad we didn't keep it—nowadays it's popular. That's where we were brought up, in that kind of an environment.

Howie: It's not actually wholesome, but it's interesting.

You said that Prohibition was repealed in 1933. And that's when you started the vinegar—

Bagnani: And the winery—and then 1937, four years later, we bought the Geyser Peak Winery.

Howie: That was during the Depression.

Bagnani: Right smack in the middle of the Depression, they were selling apples on every corner, things were really, really tough.

Howie: That didn't affect you personally?

Bagnani: I guess it did, but I had nothing to relate it to. I was only twenty years old at the time, so it was hard to tell, I thought that was the normal thing. Only later on could you look back and tell how tough things were. Maybe in retrospect, I've never thought about it, in retrospect, maybe its better to come up that way rather than in prosperity and then go into Depression. Then you would miss all the things you had, suppose you were living in a house and had to go into a one room flat. It would be tough. So we had to go from a one room flat to a house, so it was better.

Howie: The businesses were successful?

Bagnani: Yes, and it kept all the family working. With all the kids schooling and everybody got married.

Howie: Did any of your brothers and sisters go beyond high school?

Bagnani: No. In fact, I was the only one that graduated, everybody else dropped out. That was Prohibition too, dictated that.

Howie: Now what about marriage. Who was the first to get married?

Bagnani: My wife. [laughs] The first was the oldest girl, Eva, and had no children. The second was Dora, she is still alive today, and she had three children. She married a Ciatti, with whom we are in business now, my nephew. I was the third one married, two children. Then the fourth one was my brother, Bill Bagnani, who as I say has passed away. And he had a wife [Lillian Tedeschi Bagnani] and three children in Geyserville,





California. And Norma, sister Norma the youngest, has never married—we call her Lucky Norma.

Howie: [Laughs] You married right in order.

Bagnani: That was the way, it was almost sacrilegious for a younger person to marry—like a girl married before the oldest girl—would mean that the oldest girl was—

Howie: I've heard that but I didn't ever know if it really happened.

Let's talk about your marriage. How old were you when you got married?

Bagnani: I got married late in life. I think I was around 32 years old, 32.

Howie: Did your brother mind waiting?

Bagnani: No, he didn't mind at all, cause he was very athletic and played in a lot of tournaments of all kinds. As I say, he had three children and when we sold the winery in 1972, they moved to Healdsburg. His widow still lives there.

I moved from San Francisco to Marin County in 1955, figuring it would be a better place to raise the kids instead of Montgomery Street. It's pretty hard to play on that street. So we moved in 1955, and have lived here in San Rafael since that time.

Howie: How did you meet your wife?

Bagnani: She proposed to me in the garage and I couldn't back out. But I frankly don't remember, it was, isn't that terrible I don't remember. I'm glad she'd not here to hear this, I don't remember how I met her. It was a group of business, her girlfriends were all in business. One or two of them were related to the wine business and were doing some kind of governmental work, paper work. And we were connected to them. There were four or five of them that went around together.

Howie: Was she Italian?

Bagnani: No, she was not Italian. Her name was [Geneva] Swansen and raised a lot of eyebrows among the Bagnanis, it's Swedish.

Howie: But your family accepted the fact that she wasn't Italian?



Bagnani: Yes they did, figuring that sooner or later she'd learn to cook.

Howie: Did she?

Bagnani: No. She still makes Swedish meatballs. Really she's a religious cook, she's always giving me a burnt offering.

Howie: Did you have a long courtship?

Bagnani: Let's see how long did it last? I'd say about two or three years.

Howie: That was probably about normal.

Bagnani: That was 1949, that's 34-35 years ago.

Howie: And you're still married?

Bagnani: Still married. I don't know, all my friends are getting divorces, I don't know where I failed.

Howie: Maybe you never thought of divorce as a possibility?

Bagnani: No, murder yes.

Howie: [Laughs] Then the children came along how soon?

Bagnani: Two years later and then two years apart. The boy was first and the girl was next and they are two years apart. They were born retarded, mentally retarded so we got involved in all—in the lifestyle of the retarded—the organizations, the schools. So that's what we're doing today, raising money.

Howie: Today they have tests to run on a pregnant woman, was that not available then?

Bagnani: No. That was not available, there was prenatal care and all that kind of stuff. But I remember one of the things that have come up the last few years, that during pregnancy the mother-to-be should not drink. And there was not a single bit of that kind of talk before, including not even talk about smoke. So she smoked and drank, we drank and ran around with a gang that smoked and drank constantly, that was part of the lifestyle. In retrospect, that could have had something to do with it. And now there are all kinds of literature on that.





- Howie: It would have been hard on an Italian family not to drink [wine].
- Bagnani: Come to think of it, my mother drank all through her pregnancies. But it was a kind of different drinking. We drank wine in the family with my mother and father, like everyone else that's Italian or in Italy. I don't know, we've never had any retardation in the family, mine were the first. So drinking a glass of wine with meals is probably not the case. In fact, the literature you read now about it—the Wine Institute had a thing about it, a glass or two or wine a day did not affect any of the tests they do. But booze you know—but we don't know for sure. Retardation is difficult to trace back, unless its a brain injury or something like that.
- Howie: You stayed working with the vinegar plant?
- Bagnani: Still working with it today, even though we sold out the vinegar plant in 1972, we sold to a group Japanese vinegar people. I take that back, in 1972, we sold the winery to Schiltz Brewing Company. We kept the vinegar plant and my nephew came into the business and operated the vinegar plant. And in 1982, three years ago we sold to the Japanese. At that time we made a five year contract with them where my nephew, and I and two other men would stay in the business with them. Right now, we have two more years to go.
- Howie: What is it that you have done with the vinegar plant—you personally?
- Bagnani: Starting from the beginning. We produced it, I was mostly in sales, in those days we did everything, even delivery.
- Howie: With a horse-drawn—truck?
- Bagnani: Horse powered truck. Oh, yes, called on all the trade—restaurants, hotels, grocery stores. Now it's progressed to the point where its all sold through distributors. My job is just to keep out of the way.
- Howie: And your brother took care of the winery?
- Bagnani: He took care of the winery. My father passed away and my brother took care of it until he passed away. And at that time, my sister-in-law, my brother's widow, her brothers came into the winery. Her family name was Tedeschi. And they still live up there.



- Howie: Did your mother ever have a hand—she must have had a hand in the restaurant?
- Bagnani: She had a hand in the restaurant. She did not cook, we were all small kids, she had plenty to do. The restaurant we had all professional cooks. Her job was running the house, there was a lot of work to do. That was way before laundry machines were invented and all that. She lived to be 88 years old. My father lived to be 72.
- Howie: And you were quite close?
- Bagnani: Oh, yes.
- Howie: Do you see any events that took place while you were growing up that [affected you]?
- Bagnani: Yes, there was a great, big event called World War II. Maybe you have heard about it? Well, we fought and fought and fought and finally the draft board got me. So I went in the service, I was unmarried at the time, so it was very difficult to get any exemptions. I served in the Army of the United States for two years and the war ended and I came back.
- Howie: Did you go overseas?
- Bagnani: Went overseas, the Philippines, Japan. I was always on a boat. First it was a hospital ship and then the last year, it was a troop ship, bringing the troops back. My job was in the medical corps. We went to medical school for however long we had to do, and I graduated from my class with the highest temperature. So that was kind of an interesting thing.
- Howie: What happened to the business while you were overseas?
- Bagnani: My father ran it, my two sisters ran it. My brother had gone into the Army before I did, three years before I did, he was younger. Then we both came back and went back into the business.
- Howie: Was there any problem during the war with shortages in your business?
- Bagnani: Yes there were, there was quite of bit of that. For instance, it was difficult to get gasoline to make deliveries. And there was a great deal of control on wines and alcohol, governmental controls. And there were a lot of products that we bought that were under allocations. But we were fortunate that being in farming with the vineyard, the



farmers were allocated quite a bit better than anybody else because of the need for food.

Howie: But you never changed crops?

Bagnani: It was too difficult to change crops. Because vineyards take five years [to product a crop]. But we did make some by-products for the government for the war effort. Tartrates came from grapes and wine and we sold a lot of that to chemical companies.

Howie: What did they do with it?

Bagnani: They were used to make ammunition, used to make photography materials.

Howie: That's interesting.

Bagnani: Every winery did that. It's called Potassium Tartrate.

Howie: Do they still use any of the tartrates for anything?

Bagnani: Yes, but now they are all made chemically. The ones we made were natural. The other thing that was good for us, was that while the wine and alcohol was held down, the food end of it—the vinegar was considered a food—we sold that to commissaries and everything.

Howie: To the Army.

Let's talk a little bit about your philosophy.

Bagnani: What is that?

Howie: What's been your philosophy through life, what's carried you?

Bagnani: Eat every day, that helps.

Howie: Brush your teeth.

Bagnani: Sometimes.

No, I don't have any firm fixed ideas of philosophy. I certainly don't like to hurt anybody. And I consciously would never hurt anybody. And I was very happy to be in the medical corps rather than carry a rifle. I think that I would have rebelled at that. Other than that, its sort of a day by day thing with me. I know people should set goals and I am very poor at that setting goals. Just take it as it came. And hope





that when I die, we'll see how many people show up at the funeral. If its raining, that's how you can tell the friends you've got. If its raining on your funeral—

Howie: —How many people show up.

Being Italian, has religion played an important part in your life?

Bagnani: A very important part, we avoid it completely. My father studied to be a priest, went to the seminary, about eight years of schooling in Italy to be a priest. He thought that's what he wanted to be. Then just before ordination he met my mother and that ended the priesthood. He also felt that what he had learned from the teachings of the religion was enough to turn all of our family against it. Not actively against it, we believe that anyone has a right to believe as they choose, even those that want religion. We don't feel that it should be forced on anybody. With our own children we did not teach them any religion. We decided to let them go until they were old enough to decide what they wanted to do. That is our philosophy. Organized religion is something that we felt was best left to somebody else.

Howie: That's unusual for Italians.

Bagnani: Yes, but for Northern Italians, it's not unusual. For Southern Italians they are most friendly involved with their religion. The North are the ones who rebelled against many of the things that the church stood for.

Howie: Obviously you haven't retired and you don't seem to have any plans to.

Bagnani: I retire every night. Every night I put on my pajamas and retire. But no, I'm 72 years old now. And I just feel it would be a terrible thing to retire. I see people that retire and they last three or four years and then they just wither away. As long as there is something to do—like the fella says, "I'm only sticking around to see what will happen next." I intend to work.

Howie: You keep active in this vinegar business?

Bagnani: Yes, between the vinegar business in the afternoon I go to the City, the plant is there on Bayshore Blvd, and in the morning I'm here in Mill Valley working with my nephew in the wine brokering business. So I wear two hats. And I do wear a hat.



- Howie: You're involved in more things than that. Your family's still important.
- Bagnani: Yes, extremely so. We're involved, again mostly, it's mostly fraternal orders, United Commercial Travelers, two or three groups of parents of retarded children. In fact, this afternoon we're attending a grand opening of a restaurant in San Francisco where all the employees will be retarded. At 12 o'clock this afternoon. It's down on Harrison Street and it's run by ARC, and it will be interesting to see.
- Howie: So all the profits will go to ARC?
- Bagnani: Yes.
- Howie: What do you see as the future?
- Bagnani: Well, for me the future doesn't hold very much. I see many things that are going on in this world and in this country today that I'm glad that I wasn't born later to experience what you young people have to go through. I'm pessimistic about that.
- Howie: Of what the environmental state or the political state?
- Bagnani: The environmental and the political, I think we are doing a lot, a lot of wrong things. Instead of trying to live together, we'd rather be aggressive. Don't get me started on it—Central American and all that kind of stuff—government today. Fortunately we have a wonderful country and resources that carry over many things. If we were in some poorer countries I'm sure we would be out there like peasants. Here we don't see many peasants. I cringe when reading statistics like 10,000 homeless people in San Francisco. That's incredible. We brag so much about being the best country in the world and still have people sleeping on the streets.
- Howie: It probably wasn't even that much during the Depression?
- Bagnani: No, during the Depression everybody got along fine and we shared everything. And I don't remember anything like that and I was right in the middle, the Barbary Coast. And everyone worked and ate and stuff like that and got along. It's good to have five kids one year apart everyone wore everyone else's clothes and then we gave it to Goodwill.
- Howie: When you have a family like that, you know that there will be someone there to help you.





Bagnani: Oh, yes. They were very supportive.

Howie: Oh, all in all you were glad—you don't want to be young again?

Bagnani: In fact, I'm resisting greatly, right now in the last two or three years anything to do with the computer. I know that it has come and it has its place, and it's gonna revolutionize everything, but I'm not touching a key, let somebody else do that.

Howie: I think I've covered everything. Is there anything that you think I missed.

Bagnani: No you did a good job. If it wasn't for you questioning me, I'm sure I wouldn't have remembered.

Howie: It certainly has been a great life. A native San Franciscan.

Bagnani: Native son, somebody says a native bum.

Both: [Laugh]

End of Tape.

Note: Dante A. (Dan) Bagnani died on September 28, 1992 at age 79, following a long battle with cancer.



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# Wine pioneer Dante Bagnani dies at age 79

**S.F. native spent his life in wine related business**

by MILDRED HOWIE  
Tribune Correspondent

Dante A. (Dan) Bagnani was born December 12, 1912, in the family boarding house on the corner of Montgomery and Jackson streets in San Francisco. Dan grew up in the Mission District, and was a graduate of Mission High School. He died on Monday, Sept. 28, 1992, following a long battle with cancer.

One of the pioneers in the modern wine industry, Dan's life was spent working in family wine-related businesses, starting with the wine shipping and selling company, American Foods Corporation (originally American Industries), founded by his father, Giuseppe Bagnani.

Following the Repeal of Prohibition, the family established a winery at 814 Montgomery Street, and shortly thereafter opened the Four Monks Wine Vinegar plant across the street.

In 1937 the family purchased Geyser Peak Winery, with Dan in charge of the San Francisco facilities, and his brother William overseeing the winery operation in Geyserville.



DANTE BAGNANI

In 1952 Dan assumed full responsibility for the operation of the company, and maintained that role until 1971, when when Geyser Peak was sold to Jos. Schlitz Brewing Co., and Dan became vice president/operations.

He remained active in vinegar production and sales, even after the sale of American Foods to Nakano Vinegar of Japan.

At the time of his death he was a vital part of Joseph W. Ciatti, wine brokers in Mill Valley.

During World War II, Dan

served with the medical corps in the Philippines and Japan.

On the home front, Dan was a founding member of the Golden Gate Council of United Commercial Travelers, and was a Past Grand Counselor, and president of the UCT Benevolent Foundation.

He was an active member of the San Francisco Chapter of Aid Retarded Citizens, and co-ordinator of ARC's major fundraiser, the International Wine Tasting, the first event of its kind in world. Dan was also the moving spirit and co-founder of Vine Village, a 40-acre farm home for mentally retarded young adults, in Napa.

He was a member of the board of directors of the Wine Institute and Goodwill Ambassador for the Vinegar Institute; past president of the Sonoma County Wine Growers Association and the first Supreme Knight in the Brotherhood of the Knights of the Vine.

In Marin county, where he made his home, Dan was president of Marin Aid Retarded Citizens from 1962 through 1964, after many years on the board of directors.

In 1970, the Marin Board of Supervisors appointed him to the Mental Health Advisory

Board. He also served on the board of The Cedars Development Foundation of Marin, a residence home for retarded in Ross.

Well-known for his pixie-ish sense of humor, Dan was in great demand as master of ceremonies for wine and charity events, where his talents as a punster were legendary.

Several years ago, with his incredible zest for life, and devotion to the wine industry, Dan formed "The Old-Timers," an informal group of men and women, 70-years of age or older, all from pioneer California wine families.

Dan Bagnani is survived by his wife, Geneva, and two children John and Linda Bagnani; two sisters, Norma Bagnani San Francisco, and Dora Ciatti, Mountain View; nephews Joe and Caesar Ciatti, niece, Rosalie Smith; sister-in-law Lillian Bagnani and Bill and Gloria Bagnani, Healdsburg, and a large family of cousins.

At Dan's request, there will be no funeral. A memorial service will be held at a later date. Those wishing to remember Dan Bagnani are asked to make donations to their local Aid Retarded Citizens groups, or to a favorite charity.





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